

THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

FORUM

Volume 1, Number 6

June, 1988

Moscow Politics and the El'tsin Affair

By Timothy J. Colton

Few recent Soviet headlines so vividly capture the imagination as those charting the rise and, in particular, the spectacular fall of Boris Nikolaevich El'tsin. His selection in 1985 as Mikhail Gorbachev's Moscow lieutenant propelled El'tsin into the national and even international limelight. The same age as Gorbachev, physically robust, and devoted to *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, El'tsin seemed the epitome of the Kremlin's new look. How shocking it was, then, to see him humbled in the autumn of 1987, in what has been described as "the first major domestic political crisis of the Gorbachev era."¹ It is vital that we accurately gauge the meaning of this baffling event.

What Happened and Why?

El'tsin was raised in a working-class family deep in the Urals, a hilly region about 1,000 miles east of Moscow known for its mineral riches and abundance of heavy industry and defense plants. A disfiguring gash on his right hand is a permanent reminder of the manual labor he did as a youth. Trained and experienced as a construction engineer, El'tsin transferred to party work in Sverdlovsk in 1968 and climbed to first secretary of the provincial party committee by 1976. The death of Leonid Brezhnev in 1982 set the contenders for his throne scrambling for support, and Gorbachev, preferring allies with technical competence but also some distance from the Brezhnev court, found many of them in the Urals and adjoining Western Siberia. A prominent early recruit was Nikolai Ryzhkov, who had worked closely with El'tsin while running a giant machinery factory in Sverdlovsk in the 1970s and who in 1985 became Gorbachev's prime minister. In April 1985, one month after he came to power, Gorbachev brought El'tsin to Moscow, possibly at Ryzhkov's urging.

El'tsin shone enough in his first job, head of the construction department of the Central Committee, to be made a national party secretary on July 1, 1985. While his jurisdiction remained the building industry and urban issues, he accompanied Gorbachev on several of his provincial tours and seems to have gained his ear. In the late autumn of 1985, El'tsin made a visit on the Politburo's behalf to Uzbekistan, which was in the midst of a crackdown on corruption.

El'tsin's star soared on December 24, 1985, when a plenary session of the Moscow city committee (*gorkom*) of the party ratified him as its first secretary. Not only was the Moscow *gorkom* the weightiest local unit in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but the man El'tsin superseded, Viktor Grishin, was a pillar of the Brezhnevite old guard and had been Gorbachev's principal rival for head of the party earlier in 1985. Grishin, seventeen years older than El'tsin, fought retirement so tenaciously that Gorbachev had to attend the election meeting in order to secure his removal by a reluctant *gorkom*.²

With Grishin out of the way, El'tsin unleashed a whirlwind effort to shove Moscow to the forefront of Gorbachev's reforms. Putting in eighteen-hour days, he gladdened the populace, fired off critiques of *paradnost'* (window-dressing), and began drafting responses to Moscow's accumulated problems.³ In February 1986 El'tsin relinquished his seat on the Secretariat, but the Central Committee confirmed his national standing by raising him to candidate member of the Politburo and dropping Grishin from membership. Later that month El'tsin turned heads by delivering an emotive speech to the Twenty-seventh Party Congress. It had the trademarks of much of his later rhetoric: a burning urgency about Soviet domestic ills, a contempt for official hypocrisy, and a passion, puritanical and Marxist, for "social justice" and against unwarranted privilege.

1 Seweryn Bialer, "Lone Rebel vs. Gorbachev," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 28, 1988, p. 30.

2 That Grishin stood as the party conservatives' alternative to Gorbachev in March 1985 was widely rumored at the time and has been hinted at in the Soviet press. See especially Mikhail Shatrov, "1917-1987, neobratimost' peremen," *Ogonek*, no. 4 (January 1987), p. 5.

3 The eighteen-hour days are described in his unpublished remarks to Moscow propagandists in April 1986, translated in "Can Moscow Believe in Yeltsin?" *Detente II* (Autumn 1986), p. 4.



El'tsin's tumble from grace took place less than two years later. Observers agree that the catalyst was his behavior at the Central Committee plenum of October 21, 1987, which climaxed several months of conversations and exchanges of memoranda with Gorbachev over El'tsin's pessimism about political trends. At the plenum, he lashed out at foes and attempted to tender his resignation, spurning Gorbachev's request to withdraw it. However much El'tsin took aim at Gorbachev himself — and reports differ on that score — the general secretary was livid at what he took as a breach of Politburo solidarity and personal trust. On the Kremlin's instructions, the Moscow gorkom fired El'tsin outright on November 11, with Gorbachev again on the podium, this time giving the main report. Two days later the press printed a TASS rendition of the gorkom session, complete with vitriol against El'tsin and an abject apology by him. On February 18, 1988, the Central Committee completed El'tsin's humiliation by stripping him of his candidate's seat on the Politburo, two years to the day after he won it.

What lies behind this catastrophic reversal? An important context, and the one that has been highlighted in most Western commentary on the El'tsin affair, is the far-ranging and still unresolved struggle within the Soviet elite over the direction, speed, and limits of reform.⁴ Gorbachev has made no secret of the intra-party sniping: "We are often criticized, by some from the right and by others from the left," the former group painting *perestroika* as too radical and the latter as not radical enough.⁵ On a unidimensional right-left scale, El'tsin would surely stand to Gorbachev's left and quite a bit to the left of the party traditionalists who were the main butt of his speech of October 21. It has reliably been reported that he singled out Egor Ligachev, the second-ranking party secretary, for censure and that Ligachev mounted a bitter counterattack.⁶ El'tsin's ruin, and Gorbachev's disavowal of his "pseudorevolutionary" and "ultra-*perestroika*" stance, can therefore be read as at least a momentary retreat for Gorbachev and a victory for the right.

The standard version, stressing the tug-of-war over grand strategy, tells us a good deal about the El'tsin imbroglio, but the issue is not as cut and dried as that. El'tsin's character, style, and effectiveness as a reform agent must be taken into the reckoning. Gorbachev's assertion that El'tsin's statements and conduct had been "confused and contradictory,"⁷ self-serving though it may be, has substance. Close examination shows El'tsin to have been a more complex and inconsistent actor than has commonly been thought. It is crucial to look at his activity in Moscow, which has been given short shrift in previous accounts. El'tsin's unusual location made him prone to temptation and attack, and it was in the governance of the

capital that he acted out the philosophy undergirding his pronouncements on national affairs.

In the Moscow Goldfish Bowl

The Moscow party apparatus has a glorious past stretching back to the early years of the Russian Revolution, when "Red Moscow" was the bastion of Soviet power. In the 1920s and 1930s, the city's party leaders were routinely cross-appointed to the Central Committee Secretariat and Moscow was held up as a kind of Marxist Jerusalem, "the center of the world proletarian revolution."⁸ The Moscow party chief from 1930 to 1935, Lazar Kaganovich, doubled as Joseph Stalin's top deputy in the national party hierarchy (the post Ligachev holds today). On into the 1940s, Muscovites fanned out by the hundred into executive positions across the USSR. As late as 1953, Nikita Khrushchev, Kaganovich's former protégé, could use Moscow as a springboard to national power; other ex-Moscow politicians, such as Georgii Malenkov and Nikolai Bulganin, shared the stage.

Changes in Soviet society and politics have gradually eroded this pre-eminence. Most Soviet institutions now have cultures and routines that make them resistant to poaching from the capital city apparatus. With rising levels of education and sophistication, it is less and less credible to present any one locale as the acme of perfection or a beacon to others. As no general secretary since Khrushchev has had roots there, Moscow connections no longer count for as much as they once did. And Moscow's slow demographic growth, combined with the 1956 decision to sever the party structure of Moscow proper from that of its rural hinterland, has shrunk the proportion of all party members falling under the auspices of the Moscow party committee from 11 percent in 1939 to 6 percent in 1987.⁹

Nonetheless, Moscow retains a distinctive niche. At 1.1 million, its party roster is still the largest by far in the USSR, and the gorkom's offices still sit next door to the Central Committee building on Old Square. Gorbachev in 1987 recounted his frequent encounters, "one on one," with El'tsin;¹⁰ the party prefect of Sverdlovsk or Kiev would not dream of such access. Moscow remains the biggest metropolis in the Soviet Union, the workplace and habitat of the high and mighty, the nucleus of Soviet mass communications, cultural life and science, and the prime point of contact with foreigners. As a rule, the Moscow first secretary has full or candidate status in the Politburo.

The unusual visibility produced by Moscow's centrality continues to afford its politicians both opportunities and pit-

4 For a good treatment of the El'tsin affair in this light, see Bialer, pp. 30-33, and Alexander Rahr, "The Ouster of Boris El'tsin — the Kremlin's Avant-Gardist," *Radio Liberty Research*, RL 506-87 (December 18, 1987). Of the reviews of Moscow correspondents, the best I have found is by Paul Quinn-Judge in *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 3, 1987, pp. 1, 10.

5 *Pravda*, January 13, 1988, p. 1.

6 Unfortunately, El'tsin's speech has not been published by the Soviets. Hostile comments conveying some of its flavor are in the account of the Moscow party plenum that fired him, in *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, pp. 1-3. Bialer's article provides a valuable summary based in extensive interviews in Moscow. A short *Samizdat* document acquired by Western journalists in early 1988 and purporting to be a transcript ("Stenogramma vystupleniia tov. El'tsina B. N. na plenum TsK KPSS 21.10.1987," in the author's possession) cannot be authenticated.

7 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 1. Bialer's essay incorporates this point, recognizing (p. 33) that El'tsin was "dictatorial, impatient, a poor manager, and difficult to work with."

8 *Moskovskii Sovet rabochikh, krest'ianskikh i krasno-armeiskikh deputatov, 1927-1927* (Moscow: Izdanie Moskovskogo Soveta, 1927), p. 5.

9 See the discussion in Timothy J. Colton, "Moscow's Party Organization," *Problems of Communism*, XXXVI (January-February 1988), pp. 30-59.

10 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 2.

falls. This has been integral to the fates of all recent Moscow leaders, El'tsin among them.

"We all well understand," General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko told a birthday celebration for Viktor Grishin in 1984, "how great a responsibility lies on the shoulders of the first secretary of the party committee of our state's capital city. Moscow is always and for everyone in view, is it not?"¹¹ Grishin himself was awarded the Moscow post when his predecessor, Nikolai Egorychev, ran afoul of Leonid Brezhnev. Egorychev, an ally of one of Brezhnev's competitors, Aleksandr Shelepin, triggered his fall, like El'tsin, by holding forth at a plenum of the Central Committee — in his case in June 1967, when he questioned Soviet actions during the Six-Day War in the Middle East. Egorychev has since been confined to second-echelon positions, lately as ambassador to Afghanistan.

After Egorychev, Grishin, a veteran of local party work and the trade unions, showed his mettle as a tactician by keeping his footing for an unprecedented eighteen years. His approach was to provide predictable urban management, parrot the austere ideological line of the day, and make few demands of his peers. Only when Gorbachev began to cement his control and show his reformist stripe did Grishin's position become untenable.

Come December 1985, the circumstances under which El'tsin supplanted Grishin — the burst of publicity, the participation of Gorbachev, Grishin's reputation as a symbol of the old ways — put enormous pressure on him from day one to perform and to conform. Gorbachev was to charge later that El'tsin strove "always to be in view" in his new office and "put personal ambitions above the interests of the party."¹² The gibe was less than fair, because the Moscow party chief, as Chernenko remarked, is "in view" by definition. At a time of politically-inspired reformation, it would be only natural for this exposure to stoke ambition — which in El'tsin's case was harnessed to both altruistic and egoistic goals.

It is unclear whether El'tsin was more of a power-seeker than the other leaders. What is clear is that, once he settled in at Old Square, his heightened sense of duty, compounded by a high-strung personality, predisposed him to dramatic gestures. His outburst at the Twenty-seventh Congress was an early manifestation. Significantly, El'tsin stated there that he had only recently acquired "the courage and the political experience" to speak out; he waxed warmly in the same speech on "the authority of Moscow and its party organization," a mantle which he seemed to believe obliged him to raise his voice.¹³ If El'tsin overreached himself, it may have been in part because he hoped, quixotically, to restore Moscow's authority within the party to a pinnacle it had not occupied in decades.

El'tsin's drive to right wrongs ensnared him in numerous controversies in the local arena. It also dragged him into na-

tional issues, in ways guaranteed to stir up resentment within the bureaucracy. Two examples illustrate the point.

One occurred in June 1987, in the wake of the Mathias Rust incident (the penetration of Moscow's air defenses by a West German light airplane) and the sacking of Defense Minister Sergei Sokolov. El'tsin, whose role in security issues was marginal, declaimed publicly, and much more caustically than any other local leader or than Gorbachev himself, against the ineptitude and arrogance of the Soviet military. The most withering comments on the army by a ranking civilian in thirty years could not have won El'tsin many friends among the officers and their admirers.¹⁴

A second instance is El'tsin's prodding of city and district party committees to delve into the internal affairs of the central government ministries headquartered in Moscow. The Moscow party organs have long had the right on paper to meddle, but in practice have in most periods been dissuaded from using it, so as not to confound lines of ministerial accountability to the party high command. After the sinking of the ship *Admiral Nakhimov* in the Black Sea in 1986, the gorkom bureau formally reprimanded the former minister of shipping, Timofei Guzhenko, "on the instructions of the Central Committee."¹⁵ Later accounts of intervention made no mention of orders from above. Although El'tsin's prying must have had minimal acquiescence from the Politburo, he probably tested the limits of its tolerance.

If the peculiar conditions of the Moscow goldfish bowl helped shape El'tsin's conduct, they also colored how his actions were perceived. In the same way that the dialogue between El'tsin and Gorbachev was unusually direct because of El'tsin's location, it had unusually prompt repercussions once it went sour. Gorbachev, as supreme leader, could no more be lenient toward an unruly Moscow deputy in 1987 than he could in 1985 or Brezhnev could in 1967. As Gorbachev said in calling for El'tsin's dismissal, Moscow and its first secretary had to march in unison with the leaders for the simple reason that the eyes of the other marchers were upon them: "Moscow's potential is such that, when it goes astray, this adversely affects the entire country, whereas, when it acts with full strength, the whole country feels that equally powerfully."¹⁶

El'tsin and the Moscow Establishment

In appraising El'tsin as a Moscow politician, it is best to begin where he did. The punch line in his first big speech after inauguration was that, for progress to be realized in Moscow, "it is necessary to start with personnel." Party and government offices were clogged with "people who are inert, who lack the initiative . . . expertise, and capacity to carry out new tasks."¹⁷ It was a well-founded complaint, the same that Gorbachev had

11 Ibid., October 5, 1984, p. 1.

12 Ibid., November 13, 1987, p. 2.

13 XXVII s'ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza: Stenograficheskie otchet (Moscow: Politizdat, 1986), I, 141.

14 See *Krasnaia zvezda*, June 17, 1987, p. 2. El'tsin was the civilian member of the "military council" of the Moscow air defense district, but he made his comments to a wider circle of party members in the district's headquarters.

15 *Moskovskaia pravda*, November 27, 1986, p. 1.

16 Quotations from *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, pp. 2-3.

17 *Moskovskaia pravda*, January 26, 1986, pp. 1, 3.

been levelling at the Soviet establishment as a whole. Although Grishin had attempted some rejuvenation, the results were meager and not a few senior bureaucrats had been entrenched longer than even he had been. Grishin's second secretary, Raisa Dement'eva, had been a secretary of the gorkom since 1960. Fedor Promyslov, mayor of the city since 1963, had entered Moscow administration a half-century before; it had been an open secret for years that he was fonder of diplomatic receptions and jaunts to foreign capitals than of managing the city. One index of the need for renewal was that dozens of middle-ranking Moscow officials had been arrested on embezzlement charges as Grishin's grip weakened.

It is safe to suppose that Gorbachev turned to El'tsin, the first Moscow leader since 1938 not to have served in the local organization, partly in the hope that an outsider would be less inhibited about cadres changes. In this respect, El'tsin did not disappoint, for he orchestrated Moscow's most thorough purge since Khrushchev's in 1949-50. In sector after sector, El'tsin struck at the Grishin machine and brought in younger and better educated replacements.

It took El'tsin only ten days to dump Mayor Promyslov in favor of the director of the ZIL auto works, Valerii Saikin, who was twenty-nine years Promyslov's junior. Several weeks later, the gorkom retired Dement'eva and designated Vasilii Zakharov, a high flyer from the Central Committee apparatus, as second secretary. All told, El'tsin cast aside five of Grishin's six fellow gorkom secretaries by the spring of 1986, the sixth in 1987.¹⁸ In twenty-three months, he appointed new heads in fifteen of the nineteen specialized sections of the Moscow gorkom and new first secretaries in twenty-two of thirty-three district party committees. El'tsin and his confederates pensioned off the chairman of the city's trade union council, Leonid Petrov, along with most of his associates. They made their cleanest sweep in the Moscow municipality, where they evicted nine of the twelve top leaders (the mayor and his eleven deputies) and seventeen of nineteen heads of major civic directorates.¹⁹ Corrupt personnel were rooted out with special force in the city trade network. Eight hundred store managers had been arrested by April 1986, when El'tsin declared in disgust that "the bottom of this filthy well is still not visible."²⁰

The widespread turnover amply explains the vehemence with which some of El'tsin's casualties hit back at him in his hour of trial. At the gorkom plenum of November 1987, six of the twenty-two speakers, and some of the most vituperative, were officials whom El'tsin had demoted. Some went so far as to accuse him of having "usurped leadership" of the Moscow party, strutted around like a Napoleon, and "stabbed the party in the back" at the fateful Central Committee session.²¹

And yet, the mere existence of disaffection does not explain why Gorbachev, who at first backed El'tsin's onslaught,

in the end dissociated himself from it. Part of the answer may be that the alarm of some of the demotees was channelled to Gorbachev and the Politburo through powerful national organizations based in Moscow. For instance, one can readily conceive of many in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs taking a jaundiced view. In 1986 El'tsin had the ministry's party secretary, Anatolii Grishchenko, fired and ejected from the gorkom, blaming him for, among other things, condoning bribery and nepotism in admissions to the Soviet diplomatic academy. The longtime foreign minister and Politburo member, Andrei Gromyko, had inevitably collaborated with Grishchenko before becoming head of state in 1985, and it is quite plausible that he perceived the scandal as an insult to him. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was with Gromyko's office that Viktor Grishin acquired the small sinecure of consultant in early 1986. In addition, one of the gorkom secretaries cashiered by El'tsin, Leonid Matveev, took over the chancellery of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after a stint as a first deputy mayor.

Gorbachev, in his statement to the Moscow gorkom in November 1987, also expressed more deep-seated objections to El'tsin's personnel policy. According to Gorbachev, El'tsin did not know when to stop once he had completed the necessary round of retirements of the aging and negligent. Rather, El'tsin tried "to deflect responsibility for major shortcomings in his own work onto others, and above all onto leading cadres." The Politburo had warned El'tsin about this at a meeting around the beginning of 1987, but then, in Gorbachev's telling, El'tsin reverted to form and was preparing a "second round of personnel shakeups," thereby alienating the Moscow establishment to no good purpose.²²

Whatever El'tsin's motives, this was a bone of contention with Gorbachev that, it would appear, long predated October 1987. Subsequent to the 1986 party congress, and more so after the January 1987 plenum on political "democratization," Gorbachev put steadily less faith in hiring and firing cadres and tightening administrative control over them, and more in changes in the conditions of their work. El'tsin, by contrast, seems to have remained at home with the traditional levers. He denied favoring "reprisals against cadres" or a "cadres carousel,"²³ but a large quotient of insecurity and mistrust were built into his policy. El'tsin evinced little empathy for officials in the aggregate, categorizing them as *chinovniki*, a derisive term for rank-conscious and petty-minded functionaries. For a leader who prided himself on being progressive, and who had several extremely suave and articulate aides on his personal staff, El'tsin's approach to human management at times smacked of Stalinism.

As disruptive as the rate of dismissals was the manner in which El'tsin carried them out. Public vilification of the targets frequently accompanied sackings. Five district first secretaries deposed for violations of party ethics received

18 The sixth secretary, Il'ia Pisarev, was given a municipal position (first deputy mayor) in October 1987, but not formally replaced as secretary until after El'tsin's departure.

19 Two of the eight ex-deputy mayors were still present as heads of major agencies in November, 1987. The chief of the Moscow office of the KGB, Viktor Alidin, was also relieved several weeks after Grishin. He was not, strictly speaking, a local appointee, but he sat on the city party bureau for a decade and must have had close working ties with Grishin.

20 "Can Moscow Believe in Yeltsin?" p. 4.

21 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 2.

22 *Ibid.*

23 See *Moskovskaia pravda*, October 5, 1986, p. 2, and February 23, 1987, p. 2.

especially harsh treatment in 1986-87: Anatolii Averchenkov (from Perovo district, to which Grishin had special ties), Boris Griaznov (Frunze district), Ivan Komzolov (Kuibyshev district, from which Chernenko was elected to the Supreme Soviet), Igor' Shakhmanov (Leningrad district), and Iurii Grafov (Timiriachev district). Punishment was undoubtedly deserved in many instances, but the accused had no right of public reply and the press indictments often implied that anyone who sympathized with them was consorting with the enemy.

Some of the ill will generated by the rash of retirements and demotions rubbed off even on Moscow officials who emerged relatively unscathed. This as much as anything explains why ostensible beneficiaries of the El'tsin purge did not rally around him and why a number of them took the lead in blackening his name in November 1987. Although fear and an eagerness to please Gorbachev shaded the anti-El'tsin depositions, many of the tales told at the gorkom plenum concur with earlier press accounts and with what some informed Muscovites were telling foreign visitors before El'tsin's ouster.

Thus one district secretary maintained at the November plenum that El'tsin and his aides used information from anonymous letters in compiling personnel files and making staffing decisions, a Stalin-era practice officially unacceptable in the 1980s. To another, El'tsin's broadsides against sloth and error "only demoralized party activists and induced perplexity, diffidence, and vagueness." Still others spoke of being abruptly transferred or even promoted, only to be downgraded or forced to resign a while later without adequate explanation, and of billowing confusion and friction over job assignments and descriptions. Fedor Kozyrev-Dal', for example, had as first secretary of Krasnaia Presnia district won El'tsin's praise and been co-opted to the gorkom's bureau. With promises of party support, he advanced in July 1986 to the new position of first deputy mayor for food production and distribution. Kozyrev-Dal' testified that in ten months in the job he was unable to gain an audience with El'tsin to discuss his duties or the division of labor with the gorkom secretary supervising services. He finally quit to take an academic post.²⁴

El'tsin as Urban Reformer

What of El'tsin's success in addressing specific policy dilemmas in the Soviet Union's largest urban center? Here Gorbachev was willing to pay him a grudging compliment: "His critical approach to shortcomings . . . won definite understanding and support from working people. And it must frankly be said that this at first facilitated some well-known changes for the better." After this good start, in Gorbachev's opinion, El'tsin fell back on outmoded devices: "The gorkom bureau under the sway of comrade El'tsin tried to achieve the necessary changes through hit-and-run attacks, pressure,

shouting, and administration by mere injunction. And these, as is generally acknowledged, are methods from the old arsenal and could not provide stable, long-lasting successes."²⁵

Gorbachev's emphasis is questionable. El'tsin's contributions were greater than he admitted, his demerits less glaring. But there is no denying that El'tsin's record as a problem-solver and reformer was uneven. The best way to get at this is to glance in turn at three central fields of policy: *glasnost* and cultural liberalization, economic and social reform, and political reform.

Glasnost and Cultural Reform

In this first realm, El'tsin was squarely on the side of innovation. He was an ardent supporter of Gorbachev's line of greater candor and tolerance in the mass media and the arts. It is indicative that Gorbachev had to concede in January 1988 that some interpreted El'tsin's removal as a blow against *glasnost*.²⁶

El'tsin grumbled early in his administration, in a phrase widely circulated in the Soviet Union, that Grishin turned Moscow into "a zone immune to criticism." Soon a deputy to the Moscow Soviet could marvel at the prevalence of "zones of continuous artillery shelling."²⁷ El'tsin's own irreverent statements about stodgy institutions, ossified policies, and irrational taboos led the barrage. The editor he appointed in 1986, Mikhail Poltoranin, transformed *Moskovskaia pravda*, the mouthpiece of the gorkom, from one of the most boring Soviet newspapers into one of the most lively and informative.

El'tsin's Moscow leadership led the way in building bridges to the "second culture" of underground artists and disaffected youth, which was given outlets such as the open-air exhibit for painters and artisans at Izmailovo Park and the bohemian pedestrian mall on Arbat Street. El'tsin also reached out to Russian nationalists and others aggrieved about the defacement of historical Moscow by bulldozing for development projects. The Moscow Soviet reviewed and tightened up regulations protecting old buildings and restored the traditional, sentimentally-valued names of several streets and squares. A heated debate erupted over urban conservation, and there was serious talk of rebuilding such vanished monuments as the seventeenth-century Sukharev Tower, razed in 1934. The city authorities reopened the Novodevichii Cemetery, a national landmark which holds the graves of numerous poets and artists as well as political and military heroes, after more than a decade in which it was barred to the general public.

It would be wrong, nonetheless, to see El'tsin as an unvarnished liberal on all matters of expression. Fixated on present woes, he in no way led in confronting the sins of the past through de-Stalinization; this was left to others in Gorbachev's camp. Nor did El'tsin shed all dogma when it came to relations with the intelligentsia. At the 1986 party congress, he took the Central Committee's culture department to task for "noninterference" in literature and the arts — for

²⁴ *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, pp. 2-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, January 13, 1988, p. 1.

²⁷ *Moskovskaia pravda*, March 15, 1987, p. 2.

too little control, not too much.²⁸ Interviewed by *Moskovskaia pravda* in April 1987, he frowned on total cultural permissiveness (*vsedozvolennost'*), affirmed the hackneyed maxim of "partyiness" (*partiinosť*) in the arts, and chided those who exploit *glasnost'* "to throw stones into the garden of the past."²⁹ He told American journalists the following month that it would be "anarchy" to publish everything that authors write, without restriction.³⁰

In a similar vein was El'tsin's attitude toward self-expression by his own subordinates, which contained elements of manipulation and suspicion. After his fall, lower-ranking officials complained, apparently with some justification, of being browbeaten to echo the first secretary: "A certain style was welcomed: if criticism was made, then it was to verge on abuse; if it was self-criticism, it had to be self-annihilation."³¹

Economic and Social Reform

El'tsin's paramount interest from the outset was in bread-and-butter economic and socioeconomic issues. He had several priorities. The first and most heartfelt was to curb corruption and the "special privileges" for the political and administrative elite about which he remonstrated at the Twenty-seventh Congress. The second was to put an end, through what he called "high exactingness," to Moscow's non-fulfillment of production quotas, which became habit in the late Grishin era, and more broadly to promote economic innovation. The third was to address long-neglected consumer problems, most urgently the undersupply and shabby quality of housing, fresh produce and daily services.

In each area, El'tsin made some tangible gains. Personnel changes and *ad hoc* party intervention got Moscow's industrial managers to think twice about not meeting their plans. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of corrupt officials, salesclerks, and policemen were fired. Limousine privileges were curtailed for officials under the Moscow gorkom's supervision and promises made to open the "special schools," a preserve of the advantaged class, to children from working-class families. On consumer issues, El'tsin successfully lobbied Gosplan and the ministries to shift resources from factory extensions to building housing, subway stations, shops, clinics, and dry-cleaning outlets.³² He accelerated work on the drafting of a new Moscow master plan to substitute for the discredited 1971 plan for a "model communist city." The Politburo approved a framework for the new plan in 1986 and special construction rules for the Moscow city core in 1987. El'tsin also imposed a ban as of 1987 on importation of *limitchiki*, the tens of thousands of rural and small-town dwellers who flock to Moscow and are given temporary residence permits in order to do menial jobs; they have long swelled hous-

ing queues and have been blamed by many Muscovites for shortages.

El'tsin was on all these points a pragmatic activist. He did not, however, have much capacity for questioning fundamental assumptions and structures. In economics, El'tsin was not particularly receptive to the benefits of small enterprise and the market. The Moscow food fairs (*iarmarki*) instituted in 1986, which shipped in state produce through special channels to compete with the peasant markets, he rationalized as a way "to put the squeeze on the market traders."³³ El'tsin went along with the policy of encouraging small firms and cooperatives as it gained momentum in 1987, but showed little enthusiasm for them. Despite his support of the industrial reform decreed by the Central Committee in June 1987, one has little impression that he contributed much to its formulation or worried about its deeper implications.

On many if not most of Moscow's material problems, El'tsin's approach was well-intentioned and impatient but, when all is said and done, rather conventional and not noticeably effective. Unhappy about the mushrooming of research organizations in Moscow, he early on demanded a state review and the liquidation of some of the most useless institutes and design bureaus: "I think that the closing of the ten or fifteen institutes, and the airing of this in the news media, will have quite an effect in activating the rest."³⁴ This initiative got nowhere. As El'tsin angrily observed more than a year later, seven institutes had shut down but the total number in Moscow had grown from 1,041 to 1,087.³⁵

On a range of discrete issues, from vocational training to macaroni production and milk deliveries, El'tsin resorted to a timeworn Soviet expedient, the "special purpose integrated program" (*tselevaia kompleksnaia programma*) designed to graft a new mission onto an unreconstructed bureaucracy. There were twenty-six such programs on the books by November 1987. The haste with which they were cobbled together makes it entirely likely that, as one detractor put it, they were "unbalanced, poorly worked-out, and bore only an advertising character."³⁶

El'tsin also proved himself inclined, very much in the mold of the classic Soviet boss, to deal with pressing difficulties by personalizing responsibility for working out a quick solution. His major speeches and visits to city agencies invariably featured recitations of the names of errant administrators and of instructions on how they were to mend their ways. A variation on this technique was issuance of an ultimatum with a deadline for compliance. In July 1986, for example, the party caucus of the Moscow Soviet, with El'tsin in the chair, gave the chief of Moscow's retail trade directorate, Nikolai Zav'ialov, a mere two weeks to bring about an "essential improvement" in the supply of summer vegetables.

28 XXVII s'ezd, I, 142.

29 *Moskovskaia pravda*, April 14, 1987, p. 2.

30 Notes on CBS News interview with El'tsin, May 1987 (courtesy of Jonathan Sanders, Harriman Institute).

31 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 2.

32 See his statement in *Moskovskaia pravda*, July 20, 1986, p. 1, which lauds the support of the Central Committee's department and the then chairman of Gosplan, Nikolai Talyzin. Perhaps inevitably, El'tsin was not fully satisfied with the resource allotment. He complained to the Central Committee about this in October 1987, and Bialer reports (pp. 30-31) that he charged Ligachev personally with "sabotage" of his efforts.

33 "Can Moscow Believe in Yeltsin?" p. 2.

34 *Moskovskaia pravda*, March 30, 1986, p. 2.

35 *Ibid.*, August 9, 1987, p. 2.

36 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 2.

When the two weeks had lapsed, and the impossible was not achieved, Zav'ialov was summarily retired.³⁷

Political Reform

It has been suggested that El'tsin, if not always in the vanguard of economic reform, was a radical reformer in the political sphere, and that this was at the heart of his split with Ligachev and Gorbachev.³⁸ Though an intriguing proposition, and congruent with some of the evidence, it likely reads more coherence into El'tsin's thinking than was actually there.

El'tsin did indeed seem amenable to certain changes in Soviet political institutions. He was scathing at the Twenty-seventh Congress about the party's inflation of its leaders into "miracle workers" and adamant that improvements be made in its capacity for exercising "political leadership" rather than routine management. As early as October 1986, El'tsin insisted on the need in the selection of political personnel "to break out of the narrow circle of the *nomenklatura*, to put an end to its self-reproduction," a theme he revisited after the January 1987 plenum of the Central Committee and Gorbachev's epic speech on *demokratizatsiia*.³⁹ El'tsin's style had a streak of populism. He enjoyed rubbing shoulders with citizens of Moscow, and stipulated that city and district-level offices of the party extend visiting hours and respond more quickly to complaints. El'tsin also exhibited liberalism toward some of the voluntary associations, political and non-political, that have recently sprouted in Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. In May 1987 he met on a Moscow square with the leaders of Pamiat', an ultra-nationalist group whose platform has xenophobic and anti-Semitic overtones. In August he consented to the holding in Moscow of a national conference of "perestroika clubs," which adopted several radical resolutions about political democracy.

If all these are hints of political radicalism, there are contrary signs, too. For one thing, very little was said about such questions at El'tsin's arraignment in November 1987. More damning detail ought to have been provided had this been pivotal to his downfall.⁴⁰ Moreover, El'tsin's political reformism was, at the very least, undeveloped. While communicating a vague receptivity to political input from below, on specific occasions El'tsin often bristled, in orthodox Soviet fashion, at the thought that parochial groups could interfere with the pursuit of common or state interests. Speaking on the need to eliminate redundant scientific institutes in 1986, for example, he predicted a "stubborn struggle" with the scientists themselves: "For the sake of state interests . . . we must not surrender or yield to requests or persuasion, we must act out of principle."⁴¹ El'tsin never did specify what he wanted to do about the *nomenklatura*. One interpretation of his somewhat cryptic statements is that he wished nothing more than the right to pick and choose officials from outside the usual talent pool.

As for more democratic selection of leaders, a major theme of Gorbachev in 1987-88, El'tsin did extend general support to Gorbachev's idea of multi-candidate elections. In his principal comment on the subject, however, he pointedly omitted reference to competitive elections within the party, as distinct from state organizations.⁴² Several district-level party secretaries were elected from multi-candidate slates in Moscow in the spring and summer of 1987, but El'tsin seemed lukewarm about the practice and it was discontinued before his fall. Oddly, no Moscow positions were included in the national experiment with electoral choice in the June 1987 municipal elections. El'tsin, while interested in ways of broadening public participation in politics, was to all appearances wary, like many party officials, of subverting vertical political controls. Had genuinely democratic rules been operative, it is unlikely that El'tsin would have been imposed over Grishin in 1985, or that he would have been able to carry out his lightning purge of the district committees.

A Transitional Figure

It is hard for the Western onlooker not to feel some kinship with El'tsin the frustrated reformer. His zeal for *perestroika*, the disillusionment with obstructionism that he vented in 1987, and the crudeness with which he was removed and forced to engage in ritual self-abasement speak for themselves. It is important, on the other hand, that we not idealize El'tsin and thereby distort the reality of his politics and the reasons for his downfall. In certain senses, El'tsin helped set the pace of change in Gorbachev's Soviet Union; in others, paradoxically, he lagged behind it. When the General Secretary lost patience with El'tsin — a man who was more Gorbachevian than Gorbachev — he sacrificed an ally who jeopardized his relations with more conservative members of his coalition. But he also rid himself of a subordinate whose vision of reform was riddled with inconsistencies and who, on some key economic and political issues, was far from the cutting edge of change.

It may well be that El'tsin was best suited for the first phase of post-Brezhnev reform, in which what mattered most was a willingness to question old values and habits and to do battle with their defenders. When the issue was joined, however, he often if not always reached instinctively for what Gorbachev dubbed "methods from the old arsenal." In this respect, El'tsin is reminiscent of no one more than Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet publicist Fedor Burlatskii, in a new biographical portrait of Khrushchev, remarks on how truly he reflected the "patriarchal culture" of the peasant milieu in which he was reared. El'tsin is the son of a Russian working class only a generation removed from the village, and no small part of what Burlatskii writes of Khrushchev's mentality applies to him: "paternalism, a tendency to interfere in all kinds

37 *Moskovskaia pravda*, July 23, 1986, p. 1, and August 7, 1986, p. 1.

38 Jerry Hough in *The New York Times*, November 18, 1987, p. 27.

39 *Moskovskaia pravda*, October 5, 1986, p. 2, and February 23, 1987, p. 3.

40 The most direct reference at the November gorkom meeting was the attack by Iurii Prokof'ev, the secretary of the municipal executive, on the meeting with Pamiat'. Prokof'ev, a head of the gorkom's personnel department under Grishin, was perhaps a tainted source, and El'tsin had, in any event, already criticized Pamiat' and similar "extremist" groups (*ibid.*, August 9, 1987, p. 1).

41 *Ibid.*, March 30, 1986, p. 2.

42 See *ibid.*, February 23, 1987, p. 3.

of business and relations... an intolerance of other opinions."⁴³

It is a sign of the times that, the week after his removal from the Moscow gorkom, El'tsin was given a middle-ranking position in the central bureaucracy. He is now first deputy chairman of Gosstroï, the State Construction Committee, and has been appointed a member of the Council of Ministers, an honor that usually does not go with the Gosstroï post. His career in party politics is to all intents and purposes over, although he may have sufficient bureaucratic rank to retain his seat on the Central Committee.

Gorbachev's new man in Moscow is Lev Zaikov, a full member of the Politburo who was appointed first secretary at the gorkom plenum that disposed of El'tsin. Zaikov, eight years older than El'tsin, made his name in industrial management and party administration, mostly in his native Leningrad. He was head of the Leningrad provincial party committee from June 1983 until July 1985, when he was appointed the Central Committee secretary responsible for the defense industry (at the same Central Committee plenum that made El'tsin a secretary). Zaikov's dispatch to the Moscow gorkom was a fire-fighting response to the El'tsin crisis. The fact that he has not yet surrendered his seat on the Secretariat suggests that his stay in the Moscow organization may be brief, but it is too soon to tell.

There have been two striking changes in Moscow politics since November 1987. The first is on the level of style. Where El'tsin was populist, inflammatory, and a publicity hound, Zaikov has been technocratic, conciliatory, and much of the time nearly invisible. His low-key approach is precisely what the Politburo seems to want after the stormy El'tsin interlude.

The second development is the virtual cessation of El'tsin's cadres changes. As of mid-April 1988, Zaikov has not fired a single gorkom secretary. He has replaced four heads of gorkom departments, but one of these received a lateral transfer and two of the departments affected are the highly sensitive ones for personnel and confidential communications, in which a new first secretary cannot avoid making changes; all three of the displaced department heads have managed soft landings in other positions. At the district level, Zaikov has moved only two first secretaries, and in both cases it was to more important positions at the city level. In

the municipal apparatus, Mayor Saikin and almost all of his associates have been undisturbed. In eschewing a post-El'tsin purge and speaking soothingly of his desire to extend "comradely support and businesslike advice" to officials,⁴⁴ Zaikov's message is that he will try to work with the personnel in place.

Zaikov's policy priorities may differ somewhat from El'tsin's. As might have been predicted from his background, he has engaged himself more in overseeing reform measures in Moscow industry, notably in the secretive defense sector, about which more information is now seeping into the Moscow press. He has also said next to nothing about political reform. In the cultural and social areas, however, Zaikov seems committed to implementing, albeit in a less frenetic fashion, objectives quite similar to El'tsin's. *Glasnost'* has not been greatly compromised in Moscow since El'tsin's departure, with the glaring exception of the enforced silence about the departure itself. On social issues, Zaikov has been promoting what looks so far like El'tsinism without El'tsin. This applies even to the prickly question of "social justice": in January and February 1988, the Soviet government adopted restrictions on special stores and ministerial vehicle fleets that will bite more deeply into elite privilege in Moscow than anything El'tsin achieved.⁴⁵

Assuming that Gorbachev perseveres with his reforms, with Zaikov or someone else acting as his Moscow legate, El'tsin will probably be remembered as a transitional figure. A participant in the city party meeting that removed him reminded his listeners that before the Soviet reforms began, "We were steadily sliding toward the abyss."⁴⁶ To the extent that this was true, and that the slide was halted, El'tsin will deserve respect, even if he was not fully up to mapping where next to head.

Timothy J. Colton is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Toronto. He will be taking up an appointment as Professor of Government at Harvard University in 1989. He wishes especially to thank Jonathan Sanders of the Harriman Institute for advice and criticism on this article, the research for which is part of a larger study of politics in the city of Moscow.

The Harriman Institute Forum is published monthly by
The W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union, Columbia University
Editor: Paul Lerner

Editorial Assistants: Robert Monyak, Rachel Denber
Copyright © 1988 by The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York
All Rights Reserved. ISSN Number: 0896-114X.

Subscription information: In the United States or Canada by first class mail: \$20 per year for individuals, \$30 per year for institutions and businesses. Outside the United States and Canada by airmail: \$30 per year for individuals, \$40 per year for institutions and businesses. Make check or money order payable to Columbia University and send to *Forum*, The Harriman Institute, Columbia University, 420 West 118th Street, New York NY 10027.

Back issues available (except Number 1) at \$2 apiece.

43 Fedor Burlatskii, "Khrushchev: Shtrikhi k politicheskomu portretu," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 8 (February 24, 1988), p. 14.

44 *Moskovskaia pravda*, December 6, 1987, p. 1.

45 See *The New York Times*, February 4, 1988, p. A8.

46 *Pravda*, November 13, 1987, p. 3.